

*Southern Policy Papers No. 1*

# SOUTHERN POPULATION AND SOCIAL PLANNING

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ISSUED IN COÖPERATION WITH  
THE INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCE  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

CHAPEL HILL  
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS  
1936

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## SOUTHERN POPULATION AND SOCIAL PLANNING

T. J. WOOFER, JR.

**B**ASIC to many of the southern social and economic peculiarities and of fundamental significance in planning for the southeastern region is the fact that in the rural districts of this predominantly rural region there is a greater natural increase than in any other large segment of the national population. When the nation as a whole is adjusting to a population which is becoming stationary, the rural South continues to contribute vigorous increases.

This excess of population is reared in an area where agriculture has declined rather than advanced by reason of the shift of cotton westward, by reason of the boll weevil, by reason of the depletion of the soil, by erosion, and by reason of the decline of foreign markets. Up to 1910, there was a gradual expansion in land in farms in the Southeast. Since 1910, owing to the above reasons, it has decreased by 18 million acres. In 1910 the rural population of the South was about 16.5 million and in 1930 it was nearly 18,000,000. This increase of about a million and a half was largely in the rural non-farm group. The population within the farm area has therefore remained stationary. The Negro farm population has actually declined. The excess natural increase has drained off to the cities. Many of those who remained were producing the minimum for subsistence. The per capita gross farm income in Southeastern states in 1930 (with the exception of Florida) ranged from \$117 in Arkansas to \$172 in Virginia. In no other state in the country was it so low. The southwestern states were next lowest, but outside these two southern sections, the lowest state average was \$325, or nearly double the highest state average in the Southeast. Whether this phenomenon is viewed from the standpoint of laissez faire or from the standpoint of planning, it is fundamental in understanding the social and

economic structure of the Southeast and of relation of the Southeast to other sections.

### THE SITUATION BEFORE 1930

To describe the situation before 1930 more exactly: of the 7.5 million people in Southern cities, many were in small cities where the reproduction ratios were not as low as in metropolitan cities. The 17.8 million rural dwellers were divided into nearly 12.5 million white and 5.5 million Negro.

Contrary to the popular impression, it is not the Negro group which contributes most heavily to the high southern natural increase. Their birth rate is higher but their death rate is so much higher that the Negro crude rate of natural increase between 1920 and 1930 was about 10 and the white crude rate about 15 per thousand in rural districts. This higher crude rate of the whites applied to a larger base meant a gross natural increase from 1920 of about 180,000 per year in the white rural element and about 75,000 a year in the Negro rural element, or a gross number of people produced for export to cities of about a quarter of a million annually.

A clearer understanding of the future implications of this increase is obtained from net replacement ratios measuring the ratio at which women of childbearing age replace themselves. According to Lorimer and Osborn, the net replacement ratio for the country as a whole is 1.08 or barely positive. For the South, the net replacement ratios ranged from 1.46 in Virginia to 1.57 in North Carolina. Florida, which is a part of the Southeast by geographical accident only, drops below these.

There is still another series of data which shows this pressure of population out from the Southeast. Of the native born population of the United States in 1930, twenty-eight million seven hundred thousand were born in the Southeast;<sup>1</sup> of these twenty-four million one hundred thousand were born in rural districts and four million six hundred thousand in cities. Since only seventeen and one-half million of these Southeastern rural born live in the area of their birth, it is evident that over six and one-half million have moved elsewhere. Three million eight hundred thousand have left the section entirely. Two million nine hundred thousand have moved

<sup>1</sup> Includes Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana.

to Southern cities.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Southeast rural districts have exported about a fourth of their natural increase in population, supplying their own growth, a large proportion of growth of Southern cities, and sending over three and one-half million to other sections.

There are a number of factors underlying these high rural rates which we do not need to enumerate here. Three stand out, however, and should be mentioned.

(1) The Appalachian and Ozark areas have perpetuated the mores of the frontier in isolated areas, and large families are traditional.

(2) Under the system by which cotton has been produced during the past half century, large surpluses of hand labor are required in the chopping and picking seasons. The set-up has tended to encourage tenants to look to the women and young adults in their own family for this labor, hence a large family has been distinctly an economic asset.

(3) As yet, the birth rates in the rural non-farm group do not seem to have decreased to a marked extent. This is indicated by the Carolina Piedmont 1920-1930 crude rates of counties having large cotton mill populations. Some of these with their natural increases were: North Carolina—Lincoln, 24; Rutherford, 20; Cabarrus, 19; Gaston, 23; South Carolina—Cherokee, 15; Pickens, 21.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Some of the far reaching implications of this expanding population can be enumerated:

*First:* It upsets race relations and the balance of white and Negro in urban employment. Formerly in the South, there were jobs known as Negro jobs at which the white man would not work. These included barbers, waiters, elevator tenders, and many manual occupations. The pressure of young white adults from country districts has changed this tradition during my lifetime. Negroes have almost completely lost out as barbers to white trade, largely lost out as elevator tenders, partially lost out as waiters, and felt severe pressure in the building trades. As an index of the trend, it is said that

<sup>2</sup> Four hundred thousand of the three million eight hundred thousand are compensated by the movement to Southern rural districts from other sections, so that the net loss indicated above is three million four hundred thousand; also, the small exchange of population between Southern cities and rural districts is disregarded in the above calculation.

in certain cities white men are driving the trucks and collecting the garbage in Negro residential sections.

*Second:* The population pressure is basic in determining the wage differentials between the South and other sections. The differentials recognized by the NRA have been longstanding and even greater in extent than those set up by that body. Clarence Heer, in his discerning study of incomes in the South, has gone to the root of the matter in showing that these differentials are based on the low productivity of agriculture and the increase of population in agricultural areas. Any unskilled occupation which could be entered by a farm youth without an apprenticeship showed a wide differential between the South and other sections. In this category were the day laborers, sawmill roustabouts, railway maintenance men, etc. These occupations paid wages about 80 per cent higher in other sections than in the South. On the other hand, skilled occupations showed slight differentials, railway engineers none, skilled band-sawyers only about 20 per cent.

*Third:* The fact that the excess of population has been draining off to other sections brings with it a whole series of phenomena common to areas losing by migration. There is the upset of the age distribution drawing off the productive middle age groups, and leaving behind the young and old. In my study of St. Helena Island in 1928 I found that a large proportion (about 30 per cent) of the households were headed by women past middle age who were widowed or deserted and who often were left with the care of growing children. Other studies of black belt areas have shown similar conditions. Before 1930 these female heads of households eked out a bare existence gardening, tending a few domestic animals and picking up spare cash at odd jobs. Since 1930, the majority have lost their casual income and gone on relief. Recent rural relief studies in the eastern cotton belt show 15 per cent of the relief households without a male over 16 and another 15 per cent without an employable male. This class may be characterized as the jetsam of migration.

Migration further exerts a selective drag on the talent of the region. This is difficult to measure at the bottom of the scale, but its effect at the top is marked. Wilson Gee has shown a 45 per cent drag of social scientists and 60 per cent of natural scientists. That is to say, 45 per cent of the eminent social scientists who were born

in the South were living outside the South, and 60 per cent of the natural scientists. This selection of the most able and energetic doubtless extends all the way down the social scale.

The educational implication of the southern population picture is seldom fully realized. Owing to migration, the South with meagre resources for taxation is left with a disproportionally large number of educable children. The rural states of the South must support nearly a third of their population in school, the industrial states less than one-fourth. This means that when an equal expenditure per dollar of wealth is made for education, a tremendous discrepancy in per capita remains.

Also owing to migration it is evident that a child born in Mississippi or Alabama has in about 12 per cent of the cases made his life contribution to some other section, say New York or Illinois. For this reason, the educational and cultural level of the Southern population is almost as much of national as it is of sectional concern.

From still another viewpoint, the cultural level of the South cannot be ignored. This accumulation of a great mass of rural population with limited cultural opportunities creates a hotbed of smouldering discontent which at any instant can break out into revolt against the status quo. This group can be relied upon to vote the democratic ticket, but the sterling specimens of humanity they sometimes select to represent the democratic party are astounding. In other words, lacking any other tangible hope from any other source, they turn to salvation by shenanigan. If there is a feeling that this characterization of Southern politics is too harsh, one has only to examine the roster of superlative demagogues which have come from Southern states to the Senate.

#### SITUATION SINCE 1930

The trend since 1930 has been different from that before 1930. The rate of increase of population has declined somewhat, but not sufficiently to alleviate the pressure of population on resources as at present used. On the other hand, the migration to cities has practically stopped and in some sections there has been an actual return to subsistence farming in the poorer areas, especially the Appalachian and Ozark Mountain areas.

The conclusions of the Study of Population Redistribution drawn

from school censuses are that a number of the poorer counties of the South which were losing population between 1920 and 1930, have since 1930 been either gaining or losing at a much slower rate. The figures released by the census on increases in farms between 1930 and 1935 check with this. The Appalachian and Ozark areas show rapid increase, the Gulf Coast recently cut-over areas slight increases, and the old black belt cotton counties and Mississippi delta counties are stationary or show slight decreases. That is to say, both of these series of data show that in the preponderant area of the South the draining off to cities has stopped, and in some sections there has been an active increase in rural population. This means a youth problem of a size not generally realized.

Focusing attention for a moment on the young adult ages (from 15 to 25), we estimate by the age group survival method that nearly three million young people matured into this group between 1930 and 1935 in rural districts of 11 Southern states. Hardly a half million of these stepped into places vacated by deaths of their elders, hardly a half million remained in school, about a quarter of a million are cared for in the increases in farms—mostly subsistence farms. This leaves about a million and three-quarters who remain in the farm home as casual labor or unemployed. This is a great segment of a generation whose potentialities are lost, a vast amount of human waste.

In other words the situation of the South up until recently was that of the poor nephew raising the large family instead of the rich uncle. All that he has gotten out of it was criticism of his methods of child rearing, and of the behavior of the children when they grow up.

#### PLANNING IN THE SOUTHEAST

Now the rich uncle has modified his attitude. He has said I shall try to plan a way out for this poor nephew. But has he recognized the fact that the poor nephew is raising the family? He has not given any such indication—most of the plans have been of an engineering or economic nature with a blithe disregard for population trends.

The exceptions to this statement are the rural rehabilitation program of the FERA and the social and economic program of the TVA.



With all its handicaps of hurried organization and lack of precedents, the first year's work of the rural rehabilitation corporations has demonstrated that their programs can be effective in salvaging the wreckage which the tenant system has sloughed off in the past seven years.

Southern farm prices entered the depression in 1928, a year ahead of the rest of the nation, and for seven years since that date tenant farmers have been losing out and becoming detached from commercial farming. Many have lost their means of production and, lacking credit, have been forced on relief rolls. The objective of rural rehabilitation has been to reestablish these people in productive agriculture through finding idle land for them and lending them the funds for production goods and subsistence. This program is projected to meet the realities of the situation, and when the details of its operation have been worked out, it will make a genuine contribution to the reintegration of Southern agriculture. Up to March of this year over 100,000 farmers, previously on relief, had been shifted to a rehabilitation status and given a chance again to become self-supporting farmers. The expenditure for this process has been remarkably small. In the South an outlay of \$250 will in most cases set them up as tenants. A mule, simple tools, and subsistence is all that they need. When it is considered that this is a loan and not a gift, it would seem to be a remarkably wise investment.

The rehabilitation program, however, is aimed at alleviating the condition of the man lowest down on the ladder—the man who has been so unfortunate as to come to the relief agencies for aid. The lot of the normal tenant is almost as bad at times and very few tenants are able to escape from the plantation system.

The Bankhead bill now pending is aimed at the improvement of the condition of the normal tenant—the tenant not on relief. Its purpose is to circumvent some of the great obstacles which stand between the tenant and land ownership, by allowing him to purchase land on a long term contract and by substituting government supervision for landlord supervision and government credit for the present ruinously priced merchant credit. This bill has met with considerable opposition in some quarters because it is said to be too socialistic. Regardless of what "ism" may be attached to it as a label, this proposal appeals to those who know tenancy not only in the

South but also in other sections and in other nations as one of the most commonsense approaches to actual needs of the tenants which has been proposed.

That the TVA is shaping its social and economic program in line with realities rather than theories is evidenced by the coöperative set-up which they have worked out with state colleges of agriculture, state departments of health, and state departments of education, and also by the amount of attention which they are giving to stranded groups and submarginal people. In fact, the functions of the TVA might well be extended to embrace planning for the eleven south-eastern states so that this board might become a Regional Planning Board rather than one so limited in area.

Turning now to the side of the planning picture which is not so favorable, let us examine first the effects of the AAA. Here the results of federal control of production have been mixed—good and bad. While the restriction of production was doubtless a necessary temporary measure, and while it has increased the farm price of cotton and tobacco by substantial amounts, it has neither reached the lower levels of the submerged population nor has it allowed for the expansion of the population. In other words, it has benefited the more favored classes but did not go far enough in planning for the needs of those less favorably situated. This program has been largely instrumental in increasing the deposits in the rural banks of seven cotton states from \$117,000,000 in July, 1933, to \$190,000,000 in 1934, but the rural relief rolls of these states are almost as large as ever.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the benefits have not penetrated down far enough. Then, too, the program virtually dictates a restrictive land policy, whereas all of the population trends which we have cited point definitely to the need for an expanding land policy.

In the South, therefore, we have the strange spectacle of one Government agency, the AAA, blocking the entry of displaced tenants and young adults to commercial agriculture, and another agency, the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, trying to replace them in subsistence agriculture. If, however, they are held to a subsistence economy, it would mean that a great segment of the farm population would be forced to a lower standard of living. Sooner or later, therefore, the two programs will have to be reconciled.

<sup>3</sup> Since this paper was delivered rural relief wards in cotton states have registered a slight decrease.

Again those interested in the reconstruction of the agrarian South are apprehensive of all plans for moving stranded urban populations into the Southern rural districts. He who runs should be able to read that Southern agriculture has enough people dependent upon it without the addition of stranded industrial groups. To dump these into Southern rural districts would be adding insult to injury. Fortunately for the South, not much has yet come of such proposals.

Again what about the education of the future Americans reared in the South? It has been pointed out that migration leaves the rural states with a third of their population of school age and industrial states with less than a fourth. It has also been pointed out that the agricultural income of these states is far below the lowest income of any state outside the South. Time after time, pressure has been brought to bear on federal administrations to recognize the disparity in the numbers of educable children and the inequalities in wealth for supporting education, but without any results. Millions have been spent for the construction of highways and public buildings, but the needs of education have been neglected. There is not only a great deficiency in the facilities for those of school age but also a need for a revitalized adult education program to aid in the necessary adjustment of workers to the radical changes in economy and cultural life.

It is true that some PWA appropriations have been made to school buildings but these were limited and have not gone to the communities which need them most. It is true that some FERA funds have trickled into education but this has placed education on a dole basis, aiding only those states where poverty has almost completely disorganized the school system. What is needed is a national educational plan to which the states will contribute according to their ability and for which the broader tax base of the nation will be used for equalization of opportunity. Any longtime program which tries to salvage the human waste now occasioned by the pressure of population on resources and the lack of cultural institutions will adopt, as its central theme, the organization and revitalization of the educational system from the kindergarten to the university.

This paper has probably gone far enough to indicate some of the inadequacies of present plans to meet the situation in the rural South and to enable us to draw together a general basis for planning

which will start with the South as it is. Some of the salient points are: (1) an expanding population; (2) limitation of the past opportunities for employment in cities; (3) much unused land and much land which, through a ruinous system of culture, is eroding and becoming unusable; (4) backward techniques of utilization of natural resources and lack of cultural institutions for the conservation of human resources; (5) necessity for radical reorganization of the system of land use—a shift from production of the overproduced money crops and a shift to the production of other crops of which there is a great deficiency in the South, such as livestock products and foodstuffs necessary for an adequate diet.

In short, the program should be the reconstruction of an agrarian culture of expanding numbers, the rehabilitation of rural institutions and rural families, and the integration of this development with that of the other major regions of the nation.

Some observers conclude from the fact that the South ranks low in almost every index of wealth and culture that there are too many people in the area. As the economy of the region is at present organized, this is true, but this condition does not necessarily have to continue. More rational land use, more diversification of production and, above all, an increase in the standard of living of the people through the use of more home-produced goods can provide for an increased Southern rural population at a higher level of living.

What happened in depressions of the past was that the displaced excess population moved westward and took up new lands. They had to live according to pioneer standards until they accumulated goods and increased the value of their holdings, but here in the South there is unused land much better than that taken up west of the Great Plains. The climate and rainfall are the most favorable to agriculture of any section. This means that the section is amply able to take care of a new crop of pioneers.

But whether you and I feel that the rural population of the South is too large or not, whether you and I feel that planning can cope with the situation or not, the concrete fact remains that the next mature generation has already been born and is now living on southern farms. They will mature in the next twenty years and, in the absence of a revival of rapid migration to cities, they must be fitted into an expanding agrarian culture or sink to an almost unendurable poverty.

## SOUTHERN POLICY COMMITTEE

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## OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMITTEE

1. To make it possible for citizens like those assembled at the Atlanta Conference (April 25-28, 1935) to become more articulate about regional and national policy, and with this end in view, to extend throughout the South the organization of local Public Policy Committees. The membership of these Committees should include active politicians and business men whose minds are open to facts and who are aware of their responsibility for discovering and serving the general public interest.
2. To encourage consideration by these Public Policy Committees of questions which directly affect the interests of their local community; their State; the South; and the Nation, in order that the members of these Committees may  
    Serve as centers of political discussion.  
    Prepare themselves for intelligent political action.  
    To place at the disposal of the local Committees relevant factual material supplied by the most competent and reliable agencies of research.
3. To facilitate an exchange between the different local Committees of ideas and information through correspondence, conversation and the media of forum and conference, for the purpose of forming enlightened opinions, whether unified or diverse. (It is understood that members may agree or disagree on any subject without jeopardizing the purpose, scope or status of the organization.)
4. To encourage the formulation and recommendation of desirable public policies whether by groups or individuals, and as a means to this end to encourage persons who possess the proper qualifications to undertake political activity.
5. To extend the discussions begun in local Committees to the surrounding communities for the purpose of preparing the general body of citizens for more intelligent and socially-minded political action, and for the purpose of forcing political leaders to face the real issues involved.
6. It is the function of the General Committee to furnish a measure of centralized direction for the efforts of the local Committees and to develop a continuing medium of expression for the considered views of disinterested citizens.